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ABSTRACT

A participatory research model collected stories of the experiences and most pressing problems of mothers on welfare. Over 35 African American, biracial, and Anglo women from an urban community who received cash assistance in a midwestern, largely rural state participated in small group discussions at a job readiness program. An interactive narrative approach created a safe environment where women would be listened to, taken into account, and validated in their past experiences, current circumstances, and feelings. Focuses were issues of intersubjectivity as women interact across differences, across different positionalities and social locations of race, class, gender, and sexuality while sharing "common experiences" as they recognize themselves in others. The following themes were identified in their stories: concepts of wearing masks to seem other than one is, creating space for one another to speak, need for emergent discussion topics from women's interests and concerns, and crossing borders from one social location to another with its inherent internal conflict. The reflective dialogue and collaborative storytelling, where one story triggers memory or reflection of another, presented women opportunities to make sense of the oppression, subordination, shaming, triumphs, and relentless drudgery of poverty. The most important issues to them were as follows: mothers on welfare having rights as well as responsibilities; conflicting roles of single mother, worker, and student/trainee; and ways in which women on welfare are pawns of the larger social system. (YLB)

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Subjectivity in Women's Learning: A Case for Participatory Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper reports findings of an inquiry project with welfare women who shared their experiences of the welfare system. In coming together they validated each others experiences and learned how others were making their way though the new regulations. Learning is a social event where women can articulate how they experience the world. The centrality of social, economic, and political positionality and identity influences how one comes to know and to learn. In turn this grounded knowing creates and recreates subjectivity and a woman's ability to act.

Introduction

Welfare mothers in the United States have been effectively silenced from having a voice in welfare reform, and frequently what is known about welfare mothers' lives is represented to society by groups and individuals who have no first-hand knowledge of what it means to be poor. The shift in the welfare system from one of assistance to one of self sufficiency, a system that had been in place for sixty years, has created anxieties, fear, confusion, and anger for women who are trying to keep their families together. Shuffled from one set of expectations, which encouraged education, work, and family life to a set of expectations that focuses on work first, quick fixes for employability, and severe sanctions which penalize families, single mothers on welfare have little or no say in how they would like their lives to proceed. They are mandated and regulated to find work within a two year period when most recipients have neither

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the educational background necessary to secure living wage jobs nor find themselves in communities that have enough jobs that will support families without some supplemental support.

> We're conditioned to do what we're told. We try to do things, but people are shooting you in different directions. Different people have different interpretations, so each one may tell you something else. (Anglo welfare recipient in her mid-50s)

> Popular opinion is, I just know, like in the media and all that good stuff, they are always slamming us, and it's like, all we're trying to do is just get by, go to school, take care of our kids, and maybe feed them, if they'll let us. We're just not popular. (Black welfare recipient in her late-20s)

A participatory research model using collective dialogue was designed to work with mothers on welfare in collecting their stories of experienced realities and their most pressing problems under the reform in order to more accurately understand the impact of welfare reform on families. By going directly to the individuals who are impacted by the welfare reform measures we hoped to uncover first-hand information situated in subjectivities, lived experiences, and feelings about those experiences. The welfare mothers who participated are a group of women from an urban community, who receive cash assistance in a midwestern, largely rural, state. They represent the diverse faces and circumstances of welfare mothers. This paper attempts to make sense of the process and initial findings of doing feminist and popular education research.

Small group discussions with African American, biracial, and Anglo women recipients. Sessions were conducted at a job readiness program sponsored by a local community-based action organization (9 sessions), a community college transition program (1 session), and a

cultural community center (2 sessions) from September 1997 to April 1998. Over thirty-five women participated and shared their stories and concerns. The women's voices included here are from the talk sessions held at the community-based organization.

An interactive narrative approach was used to create a space for women to come together to share their stories with each other, to provide a safe environment where they would be listened to, taken into account, and validated in their past experiences, current circumstances, and feelings. We also hoped to provide an opportunity for women to learn from each other as they made their way through the new regulations of TANF contracts, time limits, difficult caseworkers, childcare dilemmas, job readiness and training, and family sanctions by using techniques of expression, reflection, and synthesis. Individuals and groups on public assistance experience a lack of personal power over their lives through the disempowering experiences they must contend with. They have often internalized the stereotypes, myths, feelings and beliefs which numb the agency of individuals (Chan, 1996).

Knowing and Being

At every step of participatory inquiry researchers draw on their own locations to inform the process and findings. On entering the field we drew on our multiple locations as researchers, as women, and as mothers. One of us was familiar and comfortable with various forms of qualitative and feminist methodologies, particularly critical ethnography and cross cultural phenomenology, while the other was entering the foray of qualitative research as an area of study. Each brought different experiences and recollections to the discussion table and the research venture.

I (Sparks) took up this project as an extension of my twenty-some years involved in adult literacy work. As I reflected on the welfare reform a parade of faces passed through my mind.

I was worried about those with low literacy skills and wondered how those women, and women like them, would fare with the two year time limit when literacy and basic academic skills acquisition can often take several years, to say nothing of the postsecondary education they would need. I had to learn more about welfare reform but I needed to find women to tell me how it effected them and their families. Not knowing exactly what I would do with the knowledge, I resolved to investigate the situation. My sense of obligation to the many welfare mothers I knew, past and present, fueled my commitment to increasing public awareness with the knowledge I would gain by talking and meeting with local welfare mothers.

Thus I was caught off guard when I realized I was seen as "in charge" of the talk sessions as an experienced researcher by those who could provide access to welfare mothers. Issues of authority and power became evident. Access providers hold their own power by being gatekeepers. They could allow or deny our entrance into the groups of women engaged in the community programs, thus exerting authority over us. The three gatekeepers at the community-based action organization who rotated participation in the weekly sessions with the women, claimed their authority over the women when the women started exerting their views and desires for political action , as a response to an awakening of their rights under the punitive welfare laws. Without warning, we were told that we could not meet with the women any more because the women were supposed to be focused on developing job readiness skills. Prior to that the gatekeepers, who were black and white women from the middle and working classes, would refer women in who they felt needed to tell their stories or who, from their perspectives, had especially interesting situations or stories to tell.

This research project offered some unique challenges for me (MacDaniels), as a novice to qualitative research, because I had no previous experience working with social theory, critical

ethnography, or women on welfare. Although I liked the idea of stretching myself, I also realized I brought a lot of baggage to the study with me. I knew I held ingrained, middle-class prejudices. Although I've been poor and have had to struggle financially since my divorce, I don't see this state as being permanent. Being on welfare was a foreign concept for me and women who received welfare were "other". I wondered if I would be expected to visit these women's homes. How would I talk to them? On some level, I suspect I resisted knowing more about how vulnerable women are in our society and how fragile was the security I had built up around myself. Finally, I also worried about not finding any hope in the women's stories. As a single parent, graduate student working so hard and struggling financially, how could I stave off depression with the added weight of the women's stories.

Each welfare mother brought her own history of experiences, beliefs, and feelings which she represented to other women in the group including us as researchers, mothers, and women. Each brought her own contextualized grounded truths with often contradictory responses yet sharing their experiences of oppression. This is not to say that women on welfare share the same experiences but rather to acknowledge that such experiences are socially and politically constructed in very different ways and women make sense of these experiences based on context, history and contemporary circumstances. Poor women's epistemology, that is, how one knows what she knows, presents a partial and particular perspective with ontological consequences to her being and moving through the world.

One woman had an ex-husband, now in prison, who tried repeatedly to intimidate her and have her children taken from her.

> Then he wrote me yesterday...That's what this one is, they go through the law library trying to find something on you. All my neighbors are supposed to be writing letters

about me..... and the way I treat my kids...To him I'm a prostitute, I'm a drunk, I'm a druggie, I leave my kids unattended....That's why I moved there. Because of him getting arrested out there. They like told us we had to leave [our other trailerpark]. I don't know any of my neighbors, that's why I moved there...which is cool. And then on the bottom of his letter it says, "I don't" [have any letters], I started laughing, "I just did that to scare you". Yeah, I said I wasn't scared. I knew it was just a bunch of shit anyway.

In the sessions the women try to get her to talk since she was very hesitant to speak and when she shared her stories they came in bits and pieces. When one of the women asked her about her TANF contract she tells the group of women:

I don't know. I'm new at this...She [the caseworker] told me I have to get my life together, my health together...she gave me til the end of April... but I haven't a clue what she's expecting after April. I think we're supposed to get back together.

Being manipulated both by an ex-husband and the uncertainty of her new situation on welfare leaves her confused and hesitant.

JoAnn brought her unique history and set of experiences, like the others did, to the talk sessions, however, the women were diverse not only in their stories but in their positionalities. The welfare mothers who participated lived in rural and urban communities, were aged 18 to mid-50s, Anglo, African American and biracial. They came from the working class and the middle class; some were mothers of infants while others had grown or teenaged children. Some women had experienced homelessness, others were in residential drug rehabilitation programs, at least one had a disabling health condition, one was the victim of incest, and still others had histories with incarceration or had been accomplices to drug crimes. Their histories with welfare

varied as well with some who were receiving public assistance for the first time while others were second generation recipients. The long litany of differences is important lest we buy into the universalizing image of the black welfare queen that past President Reagan sold to the public and is still perpetuated through the media.

Issues of Intersubjectivity

How did the women who participated in these small group discussions respond to one another?; How did they interact with the researchers? How did the researchers interact with the welfare mothers? Marcia Westkott (1979) focused our attention on issues of intersubjectivity as women interact across differences, across different positionalities and social locations of race, class, gender and sexuality while sharing 'common experiences' as they recognize themselves in others. Concepts of wearing masks to seem other than you are (Stanley and Wies, 1990), creating space for one another to speak, the need for emergent discussion topics from women's interests and concerns, and the crossing of borders from one social location to another with its inherent internal conflict were identified in the stories of the women.

One example of border crossing was the movement of Vanessa. She was one of the first to be signed to a TANF contract in her state. She had been previously enrolled under AFDC in an undergraduate program at the university and convinced her case worker that she would graduate prior to her two year time limit. She had a work study appointment at the community-based action organization and was attending the job readiness workshops when the project was presented to the women for their consideration. She approached me at the end of the session and asked if she could be involved more directly. She eventually joined the research team therefore moving from an insider as welfare recipient to an outsider as research associate. She saw her role as mediator between the university based research team and the women on welfare. She

authored a voice for the women as advocate and at other times ran the group discussions. She chose a difficult role in that she also participated as a mother on welfare in the talk sessions. In these situations she was the insider identifying with the women who had gathered to share their experiences and stories. The negotiation of role between insider and outsider at times appeared easy for Vanessa as she fluidly switched position from facilitator urging other participants to respond to questions and issues and then quickly joining the discussion to talk about her own experiences as a welfare mother. At other times being the outsider seemed problematic as Vanessa struggled to frame questions for the other women. Her normally assertive manner of speaking would become hesitant, disjointed and, at times, almost incoherent. On some occasions while conversing with the other women as insider, Vanessa would impatiently attempt to bring the talk back to a question she had posed earlier, sometimes asking another woman for a direct response.

As an outsider she was actively involved in putting an interview guide together based on the contributions of the women but although she was excited about collecting interviews and eagerly scheduled and interviewed a couple welfare mothers she did not probe and document the intricacies of their experience. Was she the insider who felt she must safeguard secrets of knowing from the outside world thus protecting the women, or as insider took for granted that she knew what the women were talking about, understanding based on mutuality, so she didn't need to probe? Was she simply unable to maintain her outsider stance and to document what needed to be documented in order to know as an outsider? Trinh (1991) states that:

> "the moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vise versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider

as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure. (This is often viewed by the outsiders as strategies of partial concealment and disclosure aimed at preserving secrets that should only be imparted to initiates). She refuses to reduce herself to an Other, and her reflections to a mere outsider's objective reasoning or insider's subjective feeling (p. 74).

Making Sense/Making Meaning

As individuals try to make sense of their experiences, recollections, and feelings the dialectic of the individual and society play back and forth. The individual is influenced by and influences the social structures and ideology of everyday life. What degree of agency did women on welfare feel they have, if any? Contradictory experiences and responses to those experiences can be identified by looking for the material experiences of the silences, closures, intrusions, misnamings, and withdrawals (Stanley and Wise, 1990) within dichotomies such as shame and pride, dependence and independence, humiliation and anger, or self oppression and political awareness.

From this knowledge negotiation takes place within each individual and between individuals. The reflective dialogue and collaborative storytelling, where one story triggers memory or reflection of another, present opportunities for women on welfare to make sense of the oppression, subordination, shaming, triumphs and relentless drudgery of poverty. We found several themes running throughout the talk of the women. These included the conflicts inherent in the multiple roles of mother, worker, and student/trainee; the listening to each other to figure out their own TANF contracts and managing caseworkers; the movement in meaning making of us as researchers attempting to enlarge our understanding of welfare reform and women's

lives; and the advocacy for self that women engaged in or taught each other as survival strategies. In the words of one African American woman:

> I think it's really important though that we learn to advocate for ourselves. 'Cause that's a skill you can take along with you. So when your boss [is] treating you inappropriately you can say "I don't appreciate that, we could discuss this. You don't have a right to just treat me like junk". Standing up to let people know. "Even if you're not going to do anything, it's not right. You may be able to step all over that person, but I'm here to tell you right now, that I'm not the one that you're going to be able to step over. Just so we got that clear.

In making meaning out of their lives women challenge the dominant images and representations of other than who they are. Their resistance is born out of a general awareness of their place within the sociocultural environment (Giddens, 1979), and as knowing subjects reject their prescribed place. Over and over again we heard women lamenting the fact that the public does not know what it means to be poor in our society. So as far as advocating for themselves they realize they must inform people of what poverty really looks like and how it is lived.

Conclusion

The interactive narrative approach which we employed provided an opportunity for the women to share what was on their minds as the new reform measures got under way in one midwestern state. Participatory research would move on to an action phase which we did not have the resources to foster although the women spoke of filing a class action suit to get access to the educational options that are allowed under the law. Political consciousness sparked occasionally and perhaps if the ongoing sessions at the community-based action organization had

not been pulled from our access we would still be there working with the women.

The women did talk about the issues that were most important to them and that was the underlying goal. The issues they identified were incorporated into the interview guide in order to get other women's perspectives on these concerns. The issues are:

* mothers on welfare have rights not just responsibilities
* conflicting roles of single mother, worker, and student/trainee
* the ways in which women on welfare are pawns of the larger social system

The ability to reclaim what has been denied and dismissed and the ability to assert opposition to established meaning has profound personal and political significance. The women were able to reinstate suppressed and submerged knowledge that was won through struggle. Will we be able to listen to them across our many differences?

Selected Resources

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